

# The 21st-Century Acquisition Leader

Paul E. Turner

**A**cquisition leaders of the 21st century face challenges that differ from any previous time in history. A constant change in technology, government financial instability and a diverse workforce require leadership attributes that may seem unattainable.

However, three attributes are crucial to being a successful acquisition leader in the 21st century. These attributes include communicating, empowering and being a servant leader. While this is by no means a complete list, all other attributes build upon these three. Having a vision, collaborating and being transparent also are important qualities.

## Communicate

The ability to communicate efficiently and effectively is important to today's acquisition leader. This may seem simple and obvious, but it is an area that is often the most difficult to master. On climate surveys, communication consistently is the top issue with employees. (Information does not flow or management does not share information are frequent complaints, according to data from an unpublished 2007 study by the author of this article.) It is imperative that leaders develop strong communication skills. To communicate effectively, leaders must learn to simplify their messages so their followers understand what the leader wants. Deborah Blagg and Susan Young, in "What Makes a Good Leader," published by the *Harvard Business School Bulletin* in February 2001, stated that, "You need a talent for simplicity—for saying things in a few words."

**Turner** is director of systems engineering and integration for the Precision Fires Rocket and Missile Systems Program Management Office (PFRMS PMO), Program Executive Office Missiles and Space, U.S. Army. He is responsible for technical oversight and engineering management and leadership of the PFRMS portfolio.

Communication

Empowerment

Servant Leader

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To be able to do this, the leader must understand his followers as well as what those followers can and cannot appreciate. The leader may need to use various examples or props to convey his or her message to the followers. Leaders must communicate on a level that followers understand. Doing so can decrease resistance and increase comprehension on the part of their followers. “[Leaders] understand the people they’re trying to reach and what they can and can’t hear. They send their message in through an open door rather than trying to push it through a wall,” Blagg and Young added.

Communication is not just the leader talking to his or her followers; the leader also must truly listen. Real leaders will listen

happier, more satisfied employees. In addition, empowerment allows an organization to transform itself into a flexible, adaptable and fast-moving entity that can adjust to change rapidly.

The empowerment skills of a 21st-century acquisition leader include asking questions, staying balanced, controlling boundaries and living the vision, values and goals of the organization. By asking productive questions, the leader prompts the team to think about the problems and solidifies the empowerment of individuals; this, in turn, builds their trust. When a leader maintains balance, manages risks, controls distractions and removes boundaries, the team is pushed continually toward its goals, building the confidence of team members in the future



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to what their followers are saying and determine the necessary course of action to address concerns, complaints or suggestions. As communication receivers, both leaders and those they lead must listen as well as speak in order to achieve the desired outcome. Organizations that focus on improving the communication skills of their leaders—through training, connecting with them emotionally, providing a focused message, minimizing the gray areas of their communication and, above all, by being honest—have a better chance of surviving tough times and keeping employees from leaving.

By listening and hearing, the leader builds trust among the followers. Over time, this leads to more commitment to the leader’s vision. The 21st-century acquisition leader must strive for clarity of message and a commitment to listen to his or her followers; in doing so, the leader will develop the followers’ commitment and respect—and that will allow the organization to meet its goals.

### **Empower**

In order to take the organization to the next level, today’s acquisition leader will need to empower his or her employees. According to Golnaz Sadri’s 2011 article, “Empowerment for the bottom line,” published in the Institute of Industrial Engineers’ journal, *Industrial Management*, empowerment refers to “the various ways in which nonmanagerial workers are enabled to make autonomous decisions without consulting a boss, supervisor, or manager.” Empowerment provides a crucial tool in motivating and satisfying employees. By empowering employees, the organization benefits through greater productivity and

and solidifying the vision, values and goals of the organization. Open communication at all levels in an organization creates successful work environments and fuels empowerment. E.D. Staren’s 2009 article on “Optimizing staff motivation” in the *Physician Executive Journal*, reinforced this idea: “staff particularly need to feel empowered ... besides the evident team-building and camaraderie associated with it, effective communication encourages such empowerment.” Encouraging communication at all levels of the organization and listening to the resulting dialogue raises the bar for individual and group performance. The empowerment of the individuals within it allows an organization to be agile, responsive, customer focused, cost effective and flexible.

### **Being a Servant Leader**

In his 2002 book, *Servant Leadership*, Robert K. Greenleaf stated, “Caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which good society is built.” To be a servant leader, one must also have a strong tendency to empathize with one’s followers. Today’s leader possessing the attributes of a servant leader has the following characteristics: is a voluntary subordinate, has authentic self, has covenantal relationships, has responsible morality, has transcendental spirituality and has a transforming influence.

Voluntary subordination, was described by Sen Sendjaya, James C. Sarros and Joseph C. Santora in their 2008 article, “Defining and measuring servant leadership behavior in organizations” in the *Journal of Management Studies*. They wrote that voluntary subordination is a “willingness to take up



opportunities to serve others whenever there is a legitimate need regardless of the nature of the service, the person served, or the mood of the servant." Because these servant leaders are authentic in their leadership, they are transparent to their followers. A covenantal relationship is the ability of the servant leader to accept followers for who they are, not for how they make the servant leader feel.

This relationship is "an intensely personal bond marked by shared values, open-ended commitment, mutual trust, and concern for the welfare of the other party," according to Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora. These bonds remain strong in times of conflict, because the parties care for each other. The 21st-century servant leaders illustrate moral responsibility when they ensure "that both the ends and the means they employ are morally legitimized, thoughtfully resolved, and ethically justified," the authors added. This responsible morality elevates the ethical culture of the organization and encourages an environment where everyone is doing the moral, ethical and legal things needed to succeed.

A servant leader with transcendental spirituality is "attuned to basic spiritual values and in serving them serves others

including colleagues, the organization and society," Sendjaya and coauthors maintained. This allows the servant leaders to self-motivate and to motivate their followers.

Finally, today's servant leader has a transforming influence. "The personal transformation that servant leaders bring about in others occurs collectively and repeatedly, and in turn, stimulates positive changes in organizations and societies," Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora wrote in their 2008 article.

This transforming influence becomes a force multiplier and allows leaders to transform their followers through the leaders' vision, modeling through personal examples, mentoring and empowering others and developing trust. If leaders will serve their followers, give praise to their followers' talents and empower them, they will, in turn, take the initiative, accept responsibility, volunteer and continually learn to become better leaders themselves. When this happens, the organization as a whole grows. If the 21st-century acquisition leader will develop the attributes of a servant leader, he or she will unleash an energy that will propel the organization to meet the vision. &

*The author may be contacted at [paul.e.turner.civ@mail.mil](mailto:paul.e.turner.civ@mail.mil).*



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